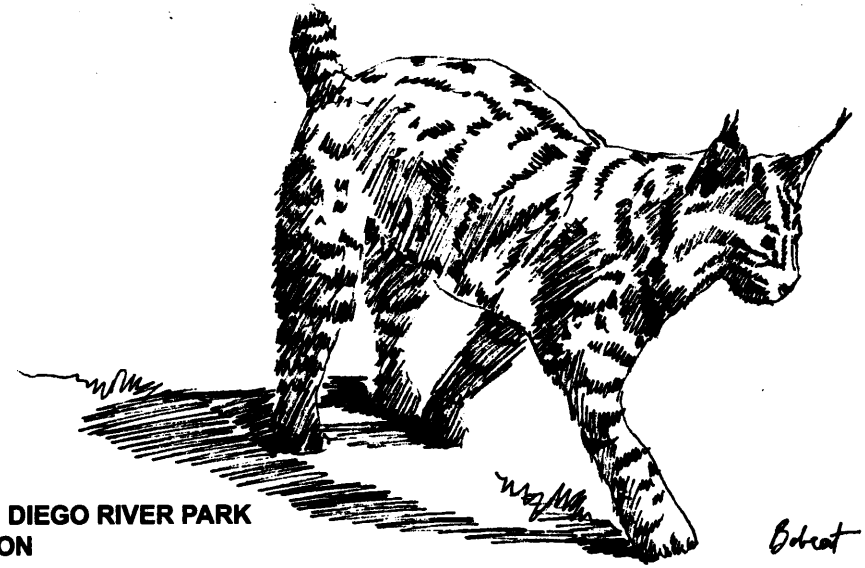
Project Orientation

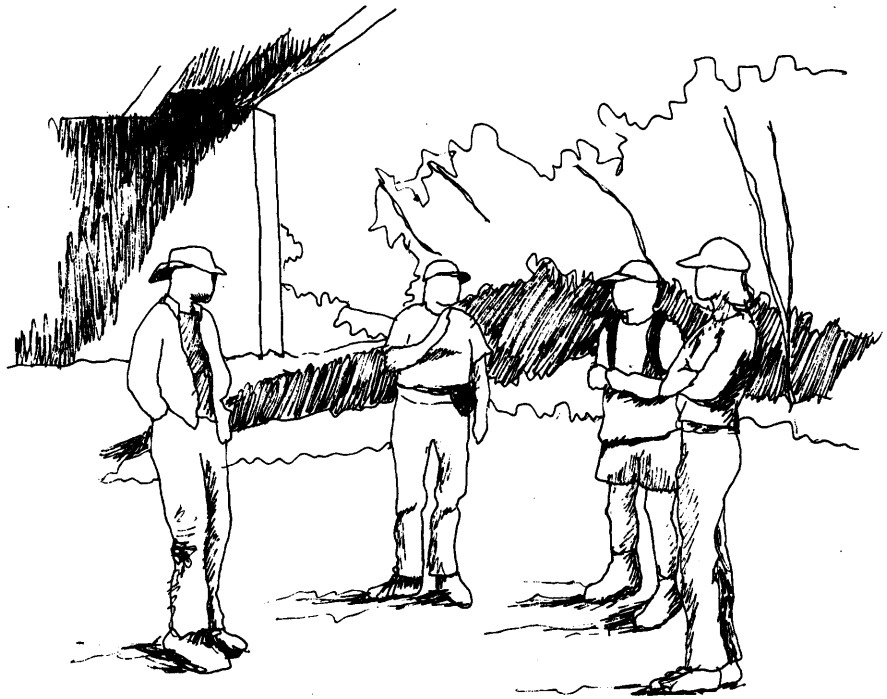


SAN DIEGO RIVER PARK VISION

Today, the San Diego River can be seen as a green ribbon winding its way through steep valleys, agricultural lands, industrial areas, residential developments, and dense urban settings along its journey from the Volcan Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This green ribbon remains as a remnant of the natural landscape that once carpeted the region, providing a path for rainwater to reach the sea, habitat for native flora and fauna, and recreational opportunities for the people of San Diego County. As San Diego County continues to grow and cities and suburbs replace much of the region's open space, these natural processes and recreational opportunities become increasingly important. Simultaneously, more people and businesses want to be located along the river's edges; competition for use of the land along the San Diego River is increasing.

The time to make decisions about the future of the San Diego River is now, before competition and growth pressures overwhelm the natural processes and recreational opportunities so essential to the character of the region. In response, local citizens, policy makers and nonprofit organizations have come together to recognize this critical turning point in the history of the river, and to carefully plan for the river's future. This is the birth of the San Diego River Park.

The establishment of the San Diego River Park will offer the public the opportunity to preserve and enhance the river's valuable natural resources by preserving and celebrating the river's rich cultural history, maintaining and improving the flood plain, preserving and enhancing the natural habitat and expanding and connecting recreational opportunities. It will offer mixed uses, throughout a unified park system, based on community values. The green ribbon, growing cleaner and stronger, can serve to connect and unify the local landscape, and serve as a source of local pride well into the future. The San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan serves as a starting point and represents a first step in the process that will bring the proposed river park into reality.



Group tour in Mission Valley Preserve

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of the San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan is to assist stakeholders and community members in shaping their vision for the river park while using holistic, integrated planning and regenerative design principles. The plan seeks to establish a healthy environment for the proposed river park, incorporating both human and natural elements in an integrated and functioning whole.

To meet this goal, this plan seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To conduct a thorough inventory and analysis of the resources and conditions of the San Diego River watershed as a means to understand the possible futures of the river
2. To develop a comprehensive conceptual plan for the river park that reflects the community's desires while maintaining and enhancing the critical natural functioning of the river corridor
3. To develop a series of design patterns and recommendations for use in designing and implementing portions of the San Diego River Park as a unified and functioning system
4. To illustrate the application of the conceptual plan in future river park projects by developing, in detail, designs for three key locations within the river park
5. To provide recommendations and guidance for future steps toward the implementation of the San Diego River Park

The historic Misssion Dam is a popular destination in Mission Trails Regional Park

ISSUES

The issues involved with designing the San Diego River Park in an established urban, suburban and rural setting are numerous and complex. By separating the issues into general categories based on the three primary future functions of the proposed river park, a clear understanding of the implications of planning and design decisions can be developed. The creation of the San Diego River Park seeks to address and ameliorate these issues.

Historical Recognition

The San Diego River is home to rich cultural history. As long as people have been in the region, they have utilized the resources of the river, and today, many historic sites and artifacts remain along the course of the river. Many sites of historical significance are known and documented, while many layers of history remain obscured. Some sites are well preserved, but others are undergoing rapid deterioration. As development continues to expand in the area, it is increasingly critical to document and preserve these resources before they are lost.

Water Management

The management of water within the San Diego River watershed is a major issue involving complex patterns and relationships. Sediment transport is a critical natural river process that has been compromised by development and alteration of the river channel. Water volume in the river channel has been increased by changes to the landscape and the use of imported water that drains into the river. Water quality has been degraded due to pollution in runoff from developed areas as well as by the leakage of toxins at some sites. The creation of the San Diego River Park can perform a critical role in preserving and enhancing the hydrologic functioning of the San Diego River within the park; failure to do so can lead to continued and increased flooding potential and decreased water quality.

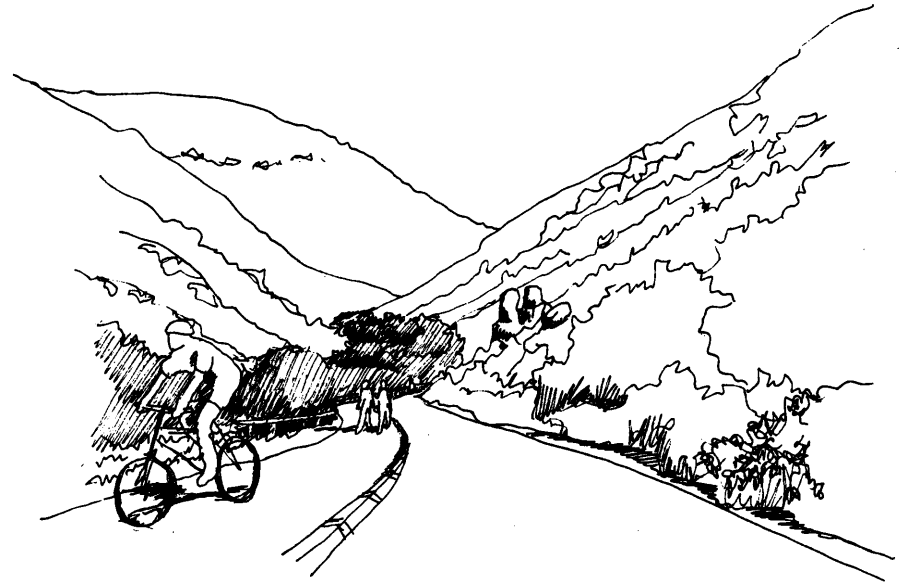
San Diego has an ideal climate for year-round outdoor recreation

Habitat Enhancement

The San Diego River corridor provides critical habitat to native flora and fauna. Dozens of rare, threatened or endangered species utilize the river, finding oasis and protection from surrounding developed areas. The river corridor also serves as an important connector between otherwise isolated habitat patches. Despite current regional protection strategies, the river corridor faces many threats to the native riparian community including invasive exotic species, human interference, degraded water quality and encroaching development. These factors combined threaten to isolate portions of the currently connected river corridor. Maintaining connectivity is critical to maintaining the vigor and health of natural communities.

Recreation and Education

Current recreational opportunities exist in select areas along the San Diego River, but is increasingly difficult to meet all the recreational needs of a growing regional population. Where parks do exist, they remain isolated and separate. Paths along the river are found only in some areas and do not connect to local parks or to larger regional systems. The San Diego River's unique and long history, as well as its natural character, can offer many opportunities for community education that are currently largely untapped. The San Diego River Park has the potential to maintain and greatly enhance this significant recreational and educational resource for the region.



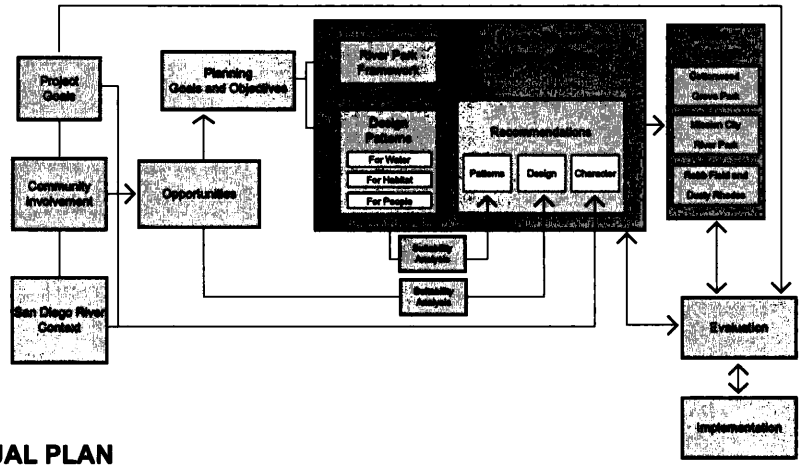
Parks and trails already exist along segments of the river

PLANNING CONTEXT

The planning of the San Diego River Park does not occur in isolation. There are currently many existing planning documents and projects relating to the river (for a complete list, please see appendix B). Some major projects include: converting the large riverside Town and County Golf Course in Mission Valley to a mixed use; implementing the City of Santee's San Diego River Park Plan for parks and paths along the entire length of the river through the city by 2010; and efforts are currently underway in Lakeside in unincorporated San Diego County by the San Diego River Park Lakeside Conservancy to convert large areas of former sand mining operations into parkland. Each plan or project, however, only deals with a single piece or portion of the river. Thus, there is a need to develop an overall vision for the river.

Efforts at viewing the river at a regional scale were limited until now. In the early 1970s, a regional plan for the San Diego area, "Temporary Paradise?," was developed by Kevin Lynch and Donald Appleyard (Lynch and Appleyard, 1974). This visionary plan looked at the region as an integrated system, and sought to plan for the future in a sustainable way. Unfortunately, few aspects of this plan were heeded, and today many of the natural systems in the region, including the San Diego River, have been compromised by rapid development.

Today, people of the region are again looking toward the river's future and considering the regional implications of planning. The first planning document for the entire San Diego River watershed, the San Diego River Watershed Management Plan, is currently under preparation by San Diego County and will be completed in 2005. The management plan will address critical watershed-wide issues for the river focusing on water quality, water supply and water quantity, and will greatly aid the planning of the San Diego River Park. Together, these plans for the watershed and for the park will offer great opportunities to preserve and enhance the intrinsic values of the San Diego River for future generations.



Conceptual Plan Flowchart

CONCEPTUAL PLAN PROCESS

This report was generated by the 606 Studio of the landscape architecture graduate program at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona through a close working relationship with our client, the San Diego River Park Foundation. (Please see Appendix I for further details about the 606 Studio design process). Community involvement, including workshops, meetings, interviews and personal contacts, has played an essential role in the development of this plan. The conceptual plan gives shape to a vision of the river park flowing from the hopes, dreams and desires of the local community.

The project process began from the formulation of project goals based on the San Diego River Park Foundation's needs for the conceptual plan. Data collection and analysis occurred through an investigation of the San Diego River context and through community involvement in the planning process. These elements, project goals, context and community input, combined to reveal opportunities for the river park. These opportunities formed the basis for the development of planning goals and objectives, representing specific priorities that can be achieved through this project. The subsequent conceptual plan is composed of three parts: the river park framework, design patterns and recommendations. Flowing from the planning goals and objectives, the river park framework illustrates the vision of a fully connected and integrated San Diego River Park. Design patterns then provide the tools to achieve these planning goals and objectives in site scale designs in the form of a design language for the river park. Reach recommendations for patterns, design and character are developed to further guide the site design process.

To illustrate the process of applying the conceptual plan to the design of specific sites within the river park, a design process is presented and three selected designs are provided detailing the proess.

Evaluation is a critical element of this process, and occurs repeatedly and cyclically throughout the project. Evaluation is based upon a given proposal's ability to meet project goals and the planning goals and objectives. At each step, evaluation occurs to ensure that the planning and design is meeting its stated goals. Only after a thorough analysis of the completed conceptual plan and selected designs, can implementation begin.

This document is meant to serve as a means of guiding the ongoing continued planning efforts for the proposed San Diego River Park and as an example for steering future land use and resource planning toward more sustainable and ecologically viable results. The San Diego River Park Conceptual Plan is a starting point; it is meant to serve as a framework and to provide guidelines for detailed design and implementation. The plan is designed to be flexible and may be adapted to suit changing circumstances.